

HOW YOUR STORY SETS YOU FREE

HEATHER BOX AND JULIAN MOCINE-MCQUEEN

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HUMANS ARE
STORYTELLERS

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HEATHER BOX AND JULIAN MOCINE-MCQUEEN


CHRONICLE BOOKS
SAN FRANCISCO

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INTRODUCTION

If you are a human, you love stories. Why? We're hardwired to love stories because they help us understand our world and are essential to our evolution. We use stories to organize and communicate our surroundings and our past, present, and future. All humans have stories. They represent our unique experiences, lessons learned, and wisdom gained. So the question is: What's your story? And if you shared that story, how might it help you, your family, your community, your colleagues, and the world around you?

Storytelling changes lives. It opens new and surprising doors. How do we know? We've seen it transform the lives of thousands of people all over the world. In 2011, we founded the Million Person Project—a storytelling company for change makers—because we believe that stories are key to cultivating leadership, building relationships, and creating a sense of community. We've prepared Ugandan farmers to speak at the United Nations, we've coached social entrepreneurs for their first TED talks, and we've helped first-time writers craft powerful magazine and newspaper articles. We've also helped people have difficult conversations with their friends and families. We are Heather and Julian, and our life's work is to support people like you as you find and tell your story to change your world. We love stories, and we love helping people find their voices, so we are thrilled that you've picked up this book!

Many of our most passionate clients—people who are improving lives and challenging conventional wisdom—started out thinking they didn't really have a story to tell. These people are standing up against injustice, fighting for the health of our earth, risking their lives to save others. But when they stood in front of an audience, they were no more than another droning voice in a stuffy room full of people just wanting the talk to be over.

Oh snap, we said. These are some of the most committed people we know, and they're not connecting with their audiences or making people care about their work. That's because they're forgetting to open up and tell the listeners what drives them

and why anyone should care about their work.

We helped those world changers connect with audiences and move them to action. You may not consider yourself a world changer (yet!), but if you're reading this book, you probably suspect your story holds some wisdom for the world, too. Perhaps you want to share your personal history with your children, or communicate about your work or an issue you care about in a more compelling way, or maybe you want to break the stigma around a particular issue. Great! You can do all of that by cultivating your personal narrative to share with the world. But first you have to dig into your history, reflect on your experiences, and identify your stories.

First-time storytellers usually can find a hundred reasons not to tell their stories. The two most common excuses are these:

"I don't really have a story. It's not interesting enough to anyone."

"My story is much too painful [or sad or scary]. No one wants to hear it."

The truth is this: No matter where your story falls on that spectrum, it has the power to create understanding, connection, love, and transformation.

And if you want to build deeper personal or professional relationships and be a more effective change maker, you have to show up honestly and vulnerably in your life—for your colleagues, your kids, and everyone else in your world. Your story can influence and inspire someone—perhaps many people—and it can expand your understanding of your own experiences and values. There is wisdom in your story, and it's easier than you might think to identify it and share it. Trust us.

This book will help you understand your story (or the many stories that make up your life), what it means to you, why you might want to tell it, who should hear it, and, of course, how to share it. Once upon a time, you picked up this book . . . and the rest is history!

Let's get real for a minute before you go any further with this book.

It takes courage to tell your story. To tell the truth even when your voice shakes. To shatter stigma and stand for all of who you truly are—the good, the bad, and everything in between.

Our culture is defined by some sick storytellers. People who tell us that we should be quiet about the pain we've seen, that we should even be quiet about the amazing things we've done. Our culture tells us that our job is to be acceptable. Don't rock the boat. Don't be too much, and if you are too little, oh well, better than too much.

But there is a new wave rushing in. It is a brave, honest, loving group of storytellers whose mission is to tell the truth and be seen. They understand that their stories, big or small, are necessary if they want to live in a world that is more loving and accepting of who we truly are.

The truth transforms.

When you take the mic and share your story, and give voice to topics and issues that are usually kept silent, you immediately make more space in our culture for someone else. Imagine if Oprah had never shared her story of being raped. Imagine all the young girls who might never have realized that their lives didn't have to stop at their assault. Imagine what it felt like for trans people across the world when they saw transgender actress Laverne Cox on prime-time TV sharing her story. Imagine what changed for the men in the world who were taught to never talk about their emotions when NBA all-star Kevin Love revealed his struggles with depression and anxiety in his essay "Everyone Is Going Through Something."

Well, it's not just celebrities changing the game. In classrooms, in auditoriums, in conference rooms, and at kitchen tables across the world, people are sharing their stories and changing everything. Women and men are breaking the silence on taboo subjects like abuse; parents are speaking openly about the challenges of having a child with a developmental disability; leaders are sharing how it feels to be paralyzed by self-doubt; fathers are publicly reflecting on the difficulties of raising sensitive sons;

teenagers and senior citizens are talking about their depression; teachers are coming out as gay in front of the whole school; undocumented youth are taking extraordinary risks to assert their rights to education; and you—you have a story that is part of this culture shift. It's time to tell it.

Heather

WHY STORIES MATTER

When I was fifteen, I applied for my first job, at Eureka Baking Company, and ran into a complication. The job interview was a few miles from my high school, and I didn't have a way to get there. I suggested to my dad that I might reschedule, but he immediately shot down the idea. "When I moved to Oakland from Mississippi at nineteen, I heard General Motors was hiring," he said. "The plant was in San Leandro [the next town over]. I wanted the job, so I woke up at five a.m. and walked the eight miles to the open job interview. I got the job. I didn't ask them to reschedule, I made it work . . . so make it work!"

Now this may sound like the classic "uphill both ways" story, but I remember it to this day, and it inspired me to find a way to the interview and get the job. Why did my dad share this story? Because stories are the most effective way to convey information, teach, and to move people to action. He could have just *told* me it's important to be adaptive and make an effort, but instead he *showed* me how those attributes served him in a very real way.

Julian

Have you ever heard a story you'll never forget? We bet you can still remember the smallest details and the point of the story. Telling stories is a way to make information memorable and make it *stick*. Why do stories stick? They stay with us because that's how our brains work.

Our brains process information in various ways and in various areas of the brain. Information thrown at us—like spreadsheets or bullet points in a presentation—activates two parts of our brain that both process language: Broca's area and

Wernicke's area. When stories are absent, that's about all that lights up. Our brain is simply deciphering words.

Now, add a story to the mix. Our language processing is still hard at work, but a variety of other brain regions light up as well. In fact, events in the story activate the same parts of the brain that would be activated if the events were happening in real life. Crazy, right? When we hear a good story, our brain actually feels like we are right there. If someone tells us a story about some great BBQ they've eaten, our sensory cortex (which processes smell and taste) lights up. If they share the time they won a 100-meter dash, our motor cortex (which relates to movement) gets active. Most important, when someone tells an emotional story, we feel those same emotions. That's why a good movie or great song can make us cry.

Groundbreaking work by Dr. Uri Hasson has shown that the brain of an individual listening to a story actually synchronizes with the brain of the individual telling the story—an event known as neural coupling. Working with functional MRI, which can measure brain activity in real time, Dr. Hasson demonstrated the power of stories. “By simply telling a story, the woman could plant ideas, thoughts, and emotions into the listeners’ brains,” Hasson says. “A story is the only way to activate parts in the brain so that a listener turns the story into their own idea and experience.”

This has tremendous implications for the power of story. People adopt your experience as their own in the moment. This allows us to cultivate empathy in powerful ways. For example, when we hear the story of someone who was beaten as a child, we put ourselves in their place, feel their fear, and gain insight into the scary reality of their experience. Story expands our knowledge and our emotional connection to a topic.

“The moral a story teaches is, fundamentally, to the heart.”

—MARSHALL GANZ

But remember, stories are not always used to cultivate connection. Stories can be used to divide as well. They are just as effective at stirring up anger and fear as they are at helping us tap into empathy and love. How will you use your story?

Stories stick not only for the listener, but for the storyteller, too. Typically, six or more neural pathways are activated when we're telling (and listening to) a memorable story. This increased brain activity increases our retention of information by seven times! That means, when you articulate a story related to any topic, you understand and remember it better, *and* your audience understands and remembers it better. How cool is that?

Even though we've only begun to understand the neuroscience behind storytelling, humans have been using stories to pass on information for eons. Before cave drawings, before writing, before the printing press, and certainly before PowerPoint, we told stories. Stories are what have allowed us to survive and evolve all these many years. If it weren't for Cave Mom sharing the daring tale of her saber-toothed tiger escape, how would li'l Cave Son or Daughter survive that scenario? If it weren't for Cave Dad passing down the story of which plants heal and which hurt, how would they survive the winter? Stories really are that elemental. They provide the foundation on which we understand and navigate our world.

So, as you look out at the world, what are you passionate about? What are one or two things you really care deeply about? Maybe it's a cause you've worked on, and you have all the science and information to back up your point of view. Maybe you have a message for the world (or maybe just for your book club)? Well, if you want that information to land, if you want to take your audience on a journey in which they become part of your concern, struggle, and triumph, then facts and figures are just not enough. You need to share a story. You need to align with them on the neural level and the heart level. Stories have outsize power to persuade, so if you want your lesson to stick, whether it's for your son or daughter, your colleagues, or the masses, story is not only useful, it's essential.

Our life experiences have inherently made us teachers. What have you experienced that has given you wisdom? What will you do with that wisdom? Downplay it and wait for someone else to lead or teach on that issue, or recognize your own power and share that wisdom with the world?

WHY TELLING *YOUR* STORY CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

—**MAYA ANGELOU**

The science is clear, and we’re guessing your experience of stories backs it up: stories are a great way to connect with, inspire, and influence humans. Now, think about the people you know who’ve taught you important lessons based on their lives. Personal storytelling—the kind that reveals who we are and what we care about—is the most potent and effective way to connect with the world around us. Personal storytelling is at the heart of creating and nurturing a more empathetic world. And your story is just as important as anyone else’s. So why is it that powerful and authentic personal stories are so rarely heard?

We live in a world where we are supposed to show each other all the good moments and bury the things that make us feel ashamed or uncertain—those things that make us look bad, sad, or weak. All it takes is a scroll through social media to see this.

If social media actually reflected reality, then it would seem our collective existence would be one long wedding weekend or a never-ending day at a pristine beach (with or without the kiddos of course).

The truth is, the important lessons and wisdom come as often—or more often—in moments of challenge, grief, uncertainty, and turmoil, as in times of joy and tranquility.

So many of us keep our stories inside because we fear what people will think: *They would judge me if they knew I wasn't raised by my mom. They would think less of me if they knew I never graduated. They would never forgive me if they knew I cheated on him.*

Look, human life is complicated, and you would be hard-pressed to find a human being who hasn't seen some dark days, made some questionable decisions, and learned lessons the really hard way.

And we don't think anyone reading this book *wants* to live in a world that asks us to keep these secrets. Your choice to be real and share your story will change our culture to become more open and representative of who we truly are.

Right now there is someone out there—it may be a friend, a cousin, or a stranger across the world—who needs to hear your specific story. Your story has the power to shape how someone else sees themselves. But because we so often stay buttoned-up and either hide or discredit our story, we deny the world our unique wisdom.

Take Caledonia Curry, the artist known as Swoon. When we met her, she was a renowned artist who had given speeches all over the world on the power of art. But she had never told her personal story. She felt it was too dramatic, and she had a subconscious belief that if people in the art world knew who she really was and where she really came from, they would discredit her. She also thought that her family might be mad at her for putting their experience out there. See, both of Callie's parents were addicted to heroin. Her story is about forgiving her parents for her chaotic and sometimes neglected childhood. It's about learning that addiction is often rooted in severe childhood trauma and coming to see her parents as people who were doing their best given what they had been through.

Sharing her family's story was a powerful and emotional experience for Callie. While she was preparing, she told herself that her first talk would just be a practice run. She was sharing in a small venue with dozens of other speakers. She thought she might just slip under the radar. But her story struck a chord, and the online video she thought no one would really ever see ended up reaching people across the world. She got such a strong response that her whole life changed. People started reaching out to her and saying that her talk shifted their perspective, inspired them to forgive,

and helped them to see their family members with more compassion. She was getting thousands of comments on social media and countless emails. Among those emails were some from long-lost relatives who said things like: “Thank you for sharing. We are so glad you are OK. We’ve been worried about you since you were a child, Callie.” One relative wrote: “Thank you for talking about forgiveness of your mother; she loved you. I know you know that.”

Of course, there were more than a handful of mean comments—people saying that addicts should die or that Callie was insincere. There are always weird, negative people on the Internet. But Callie felt deeply connected to herself, to her truth, and to the community of compassionate and loving people who came out to hear her message. Through her sharing, Callie experienced one of the most profound truths of personal storytelling: Sharing your story allows your community to find you and you to find your community. It allows the people who need to hear you *to hear you*.

Sharing her story didn’t just allow Callie to unburden herself of that story, it allowed her to connect with others who care about the issue. Callie is deeply committed to transforming our response to and treatment of addiction. Her story led to life- and career-changing opportunities to help people who are addicted and others without a voice on the national stage. She inspired others to step up and speak out, and she became a thought leader on the issue—one who now works with nonprofits and government officials to change the narrative on addiction.

Callie’s success in the wake of telling her most personal story—one that she thought could bring shame and disapproval—shows how much our society craves *realness*. We spend way too much time in filtered social media moments and not enough time in the sometimes prickly weeds of real life. By choosing to tell your story, you help bring the messy, the hard, the true stories of life into the light—and give others going through the same thing confidence that they are not alone.

When you think about sharing your story, internal objections will certainly come up. Sharing your story isn’t always easy. And we will help you navigate some of the real-world challenges of living out loud. But for now, focus on pulling out the experiences that have shaped who you are today and learning to view those stories as valuable. Your job right now is to explore your story and start to own it, not to predict how people are going to react to it.

I've always lived my life as an open book. Secrets are too heavy to carry. I'm an extrovert, and I love humans. Sharing openly and often makes me feel closer to people. In times of shame or regret, the truth feels like it is burning a hole inside me until I tell someone. I say it all out loud . . . from the smaller things like overdrawing my bank account or worrying that I drank too much, to the bigger things like experiencing regret and disgust about a sexual relationship or being paralyzed by anxiety. **Those experiences are all part of who I am and are actually part of my power.** Maybe I wish they never happened, but they did, so now my choice is what I do with them. I can choose to hide parts of myself, or I can choose to share the wisdom I have gained from my experience.

When Julian and I say you should share your story, we don't mean it as a confession or a "coming clean." We mean sharing your experiences and the lessons they taught you, which have helped you and could possibly help others. See, the benefits go every which way when it comes to sharing. The storyteller benefits from standing in a deeper level of authenticity with themselves and the audience. The listener benefits both by hearing the lessons within the story, and also by witnessing someone so willing to speak their truth. You know that experience of watching someone articulate something so important to them that maybe their voice is shaking or their hands are trembling a bit? You learn something about the human experience watching someone be that honest.

And there is just a burden that is lifted when you stop curating yourself for the outside world and decide to say the things that are most important to you. It doesn't always go over smoothly, but you get to see who accepts you as you and build deeper relationships with them. I see it happen every day with new storytellers who start being more of themselves out loud. There is a real power in saying to the world: This is who I am. This is what I have been through. This is what I learned.

I am not giving you a command to live life as an open book. But I argue that when you live out loud and share your stories—the good, the bad, and the unthinkable—you have a deeper relationship with yourself, and you open

yourself up to more authentic relationships with those willing to see you. You have a story, and it holds innate power—you get to choose what you do with it.

Heather

“It is better to be hated for what you are than to be loved for what you are not.”

—ANDRÉ GIDE

WHAT MAKES A GOOD STORY

Heather and I scooted over to make more room as we took our seats on the floor of a beautiful home in the Presidio Heights neighborhood of San Francisco. The room was small and packed with about thirty people. We were there for a fundraiser, invited because Heather, although only twenty-six at the time, was managing director of a national nonprofit working with young people and was invited to these types of things. We had come to see a rising star in the world of social justice and environmental nonprofits named Van Jones.

We knew Van a bit, but not really. We had joined him recently when he was protesting a youth prison near Sacramento. He was fiery and furious that day, speaking from the back of a truck bed. I remember appreciating his passion and his ability to communicate what was wrong with the system and what we could do about it.

In the living room that night, Van stood with no notes, no PowerPoint, no handouts. He just started talking. He playfully ribbed the well-heeled liberal crowd about their Priuses and Marin County yoga retreats. He talked about how, as his efforts drew more attention, he gained more access to things like yoga and leadership retreats and all the beautiful nature around the Bay Area.

His tone shifted as he spoke about his work day to day in Oakland's low-income black communities, just across the bridge from Marin County. He recounted the funerals he'd attended that year. He grew emotional talking about the families he'd consoled and the kids he'd seen locked up for years, the arguments he'd gotten into about unnecessary police intervention. He talked about how it became more difficult to understand and accept the divide he was traversing daily. He told his personal story of living in two totally different worlds, only miles apart.

We all sat in rapt attention as he began to tell us what was possible and how we could help bridge these worlds in important ways. He talked about climate change and the environment and the billions of dollars we needed to invest to make our economy more ecologically sustainable. He talked about the millions in need not just of jobs, but of careers, and how we might “ensure the people who most need work are doing the work that most needs to be done.”

I was completely enthralled by his message. Because for me, it wasn't abstract at all. I was born in Oakland but left at a young age because my parents determined it was going to be too challenging to raise three boys in an area that was seeing opportunity decrease and violence and uncertainty increase. It was a decision that my brothers and I grew to appreciate, but one which we often lamented. “Who would we be if we had stayed in Oakland?” we'd ask ourselves. Still, I knew the kids Van was speaking of. My cousins were those kids.

What Van couldn't know that day was that, when I heard his story and his vision, I was thinking very specifically of two of my favorite cousins, who had been locked up for close to ten years at the time. As my heart rate increased and tears filled my eyes, I was thinking, “How can I position myself to help my cousins when they get out in a few years?” I told myself that day that the answer was to join Van in his efforts and to cultivate relationships and connections for my cousins and others like them. I would join Van's new organization, Green For All, less than a year later. I worked at Green For All for nine years, and the Million Person Project finds its lineage in my work there.

It all started that evening, on the floor of that home. Stories can change your heart, and when your heart is moved, there is no telling what you can do. Quite simply, Van told a story that changed the course of my life. I am forever grateful for that, and I've never forgotten the power of a story well told, from the heart.

Julian

“You can’t fake it. People can smell BS, and so you have to really feel the words that you’re saying—and when you do, you come to light for people.”

—RESHMA SAUJANI

Before we get started on your story, let’s talk about the key components of good storytelling. Stories can be delivered in so many ways: face-to-face; in books, essays, podcasts, songs, or movies; on the stage or the radio. We bet you can identify a powerful story in most of those media right now.

The content and delivery can be dramatically different, but there are some basic elements that make for good stories. It’s important to understand those elements when you are working on your narrative. In this chapter, we’ll look at basic structure and the content that will make your story matter to the people who hear it.

The recipe for a powerful story is pretty simple.

Specific setting: Where does the story take place? How can you paint a picture of that place? Effective stories show a particular time, place, setting, mood, color, sound, smell, texture, and taste. The more you can communicate this, the more power your story will have to engage people. Details are what make stories come alive.

Characters: If you stop at a setting, it’s only a description, not a story. Your story must have characters. We are talking about personal storytelling in this book, so you will, of course, be a main character, but you will be joined by others. Just as with setting, details will help your characters come to life. How someone looks, the characteristics of their voice, how you interpret their mood or movements are all details that animate a character.

Action, conflict, change, and turning points: It’s not a story if nothing happens. Your story should express growth and change. Most often when we think of a story, we think about conflict. Our world is filled with stories of good vs. evil and right vs. wrong. But when it comes to your personal story, it may not be that simple or straightforward. Our personal experiences are more complex and nuanced, and it’s important to have your story reflect this.

Regardless of whether it's a very straightforward conflict or something more complicated, you must have some clarity around what has changed for you and what led to the change. Conflict can manifest in a single event or be something that you recognize over time. So much of what shapes us is how we react to conflict and struggle in our lives. What are the turning points (large and dramatic or smaller and subtle) that have shaped your journey?

In some cases you may still feel like you are in the middle of a turning point or life change. We call stories told from this perspective “messages from the middle.” In that case, you may not have exact clarity on the “end” of the story or on your message, but you are still sharing your changes and lessons learned to date.

These are three basic elements of a good story, but in our years of working with change makers of all stripes on their personal stories, we've identified a few more components that are critically important to understand and include in your storytelling. The following elements will set your story and message apart. These aspects of your narrative have less to do with story structure and more to do with your commitment to your message and your truth.

Vulnerability and emotionally resonant content: This is a big one. A good story not only takes us to a specific time and place, but it also makes us feel something! If you want your story to stick, it needs to resonate emotionally with your audience. Information, facts, and figures can change minds, but emotions and a vulnerable, honest delivery change actions. The first member of your audience you need to move? YOU!

The best barometer for whether your story has emotional resonance is whether it makes you feel something. This is why personal narrative demands courage. It requires you to explore and share stories that make your heart beat fast. Rooting your message in honest emotional content will help you feel connected to what you are saying and help your audience feel connected to you. As we learned in the first chapter, if you feel something, your audience will feel something.

When we say your story sets us free, this is what we are talking about. By taking the courageous step of sharing a story that is deeply true to you, that makes you feel vulnerable and has real emotion, you will experience a new feeling of personal power, and your audience will feel that power, too. Creating the potential for this starts with truth. It starts with courage, vulnerability, and emotion.

Your message: Why are you telling your story? If your audience left with one message, what would it be? This is critical when examining your story's power. Many people ask the question, "What could someone learn from my life experiences?" Well, we want you to take yourself seriously and answer that. What message does your story carry? Is it a message about not losing hope even when things feel dire? Admitting your mistakes even when you're afraid of the consequences? Following your creative dreams? Taking care of yourself while raising children? When you tell your story, it is always important to know what the takeaway message is for your listeners. You are telling it not only so they can get to know you, but also to inspire and empower them.

Values: Values provide important context for why you care about a given issue. Sharing how your values were shaped helps the audience understand you and your passion much better. If we just tell our stories and we don't share our values, the audience will make assumptions about what is important to us and what we learned. Using story to clarify your personal values is important because, although we share language around values, our values are unique to us. You don't want your audience laying their understanding of a given value over your understanding, which has been defined and developed by your lived experience. Really being able to articulate your values and what they mean to you will help build connection and understanding.

A word about the difference between values and message. Values are your guiding principles. A message is the way you bring those guiding principles into the real world. For example, if you hold a value around the importance of family, your message might highlight the need to carve out quality time every single day for your family. Alternatively, you might have a message about finding time for yourself every single day so you can be at your best for your family. Both of these messages revolve around a value of family, but the message itself is different.

Now that we've explored the elements that make up a good personal narrative, it's time to get busy. With an open heart and mind, we will start exploring your story. Remember, you are doing this for your own liberation, and for the liberation of your family, friends, and community. You have a story. Let's uncover it!

“Talking about your work is one thing, but telling the story of WHY you do the work opens you up to such a deeper level of connection and understanding.”

—JOHN KAGANGA

FINDING YOUR STORY

It's surprising how little time we spend reflecting on our lives. Maybe we will briefly pause and look back on the past at a milestone birthday or the beginning of a new chapter, but generally we forge ahead without taking much time to stop and think about what has made us who we are and why we value and believe the things we value and believe.

A key part of powerfully telling your story is doing deep reflection on your experiences and really starting to understand your life's path. Another is identifying your deepest-held values within your life journey. Reflecting on your life as a whole and identifying your values can be a very powerful exercise. Let's get started!

The first step is to create a **life map** so you can see your life as a whole. When we ask people to start telling their story, most don't know where to start. The life map is your starting point. **It gives you time to just gaze back upon your life and the experiences and people that shaped you.** Life mapping works because you aren't analyzing your life right now and what it means; you are just getting it all out. Don't sweat how it fits into your message or if you'd ever share this part or that part with others. We will get to all that later. Life mapping is just a tool for you to start reflecting.

So, what is a life map? It's exactly what it sounds like—a visual map of your life.

Get a piece of paper and a pen or set of markers, and follow the instructions below.

Set aside at least forty-five minutes for this exercise. Find a quiet place, get comfortable, and be ready to relax, turn inward, and focus.

You will need:

- A large piece of paper

- Colored pencils, pens, or crayons
- Tea, snacks, coffee, water
- Music or headphones (whatever will allow you to chill and focus)

Starting at the beginning and using simple pictures, draw out your life. Don't worry if you're not artistic. That's not the point. Some of the best life maps have stick figures.

Here are the things to include on your map:

- Turning points
- Influential people
- Moments of challenge
- Moments of celebration
- Moments you'll never forget
- Big choices you made
- Big choices that were made for you

Once you finish your map, step back and take a look. Let it all in, the hard moments and the amazing ones. We all have things on our map we are very proud of and things we wish we could erase.

The first step is acceptance. This life, this story, is yours. Before you do anything with it, your first task is to own it! And that is a *huge* first step.

It seems unbelievable to say, but my life was changed by a quote I came across in a public bathroom. I was washing my hands when I looked up and saw this quote: "Forgiveness is giving up all hope for a better past."

I stopped mid-handwashing. Wow. Really? Is it really that simple? Is that what keeps us in the pain of our stories—just wishing over and over and over again that it didn't happen or that something different had happened? All I have to do is give up hope for a better past? "God," I thought, "I can

do that.” I stared at myself in the mirror and just started laughing. When I came out of the bathroom, I was still smiling. Julian asked me cautiously, “What are you laughing at?”

“I think my life just changed from something I read on a bathroom wall,” I said. “I need a minute to figure out if I really get it or not.”

I did get it, and that quote helped me access a whole other level of acceptance of my past. It helped me let go of some things that were really hard pills to swallow. The quote didn’t help me heal from those incidents immediately, but it pushed me along on my pathway of healing.

Heather

Accepting your story is a must. You don’t have to be 100 percent Zen and love everyone who did you wrong in the past, but it’s hard to mine the wisdom of your past until you have accepted it.

Because, ultimately, **your story is not about what happened to you or what you did, it is about who you have chosen to be, given all you’ve seen.**

Sometimes, accepting your story and being able to look upon your life map peacefully is a long process. Sometimes it happens right away. Most of the time, it requires a little time and getting used to. Most people who make a life map have never looked at the events of their life in one place. It’s cool that you are doing it; it’s a way of honoring everything you have done and seen. Take your time with it. Pin your map up on your wall and honor it all. Feel free to add to it as new ideas come up. If you are open to sharing it with a loved one, do. That can help you on your pathway of acceptance.

When you look at your life map and reflect on your life as a whole, you can start to see how the beliefs you hold most dear were shaped. Can you see that on your map? Remember, values are what make stories so impactful.

Some people may hear your story, relate to your experiences, and understand your values directly. Other people may not relate to your experiences, but when they hear about how your experiences shaped what you value, they will gain a deeper

understanding and empathy. Thus, sharing how your life experiences shaped your values broadens the impact your story can have.

Let's look at a definition of values from the Oxford English Dictionary: *a person's principles or standards of behavior; one's judgment of what is important in life*. Our values guide our lives, our work, our relationships, and our interactions with the world.

Here's how to uncover the values held within your life and represented on your life map—take one turning point in your life, and think about how it might have influenced your beliefs or values.

Sometimes our values are passed down because someone set a good example for us, and sometimes our values are shaped because a value was lacking in our lives and we wished we'd had it.

Here are a few examples from our clients:

SEAN A. WATKINS: “When I was in high school I got the rare opportunity to spend a year abroad in Brazil. I was being raised by my mom and she was unable to pay for my trip, but the local Rotary [Club] granted a full scholarship for my trip. It was a life-changing experience. Being immersed in a totally different culture opened my mind to the world and made me appreciate the diversity of experiences we have as human beings.” **Value: Travel**

DANIELLE COATES-CONNOR: “When I was growing up it was unimaginable to me that I could be queer and still be loved by my community. I was so scared of disappointing people that I refused to admit it, even to myself. Hiding from my truth took energy and created pain. That's why I value being in communities that are proactively welcoming, so that people have the courage to be their truest, most amazing self.” **Value: Honesty**

SACHI CUNNINGHAM: “I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder when I was in college. It was a tough pill to swallow. I was ashamed of my diagnosis and scared for my future. I had to do a lot to manage my diagnosis and the stigma that came with it. My greatest medicine has been the ocean. I am a surfer and big wave photographer and being in the ocean nearly every day has been such an important part of my healing and my ability to thrive.” **Value: Nature heals**

Working with values can be tricky. It is an imperfect science. Pull out two or three values from your life map. They might be compassion, family, honesty, connection, equity, humility, or balance. It's different for everyone. There are no good or bad values; no right or wrong. There are only your values.

Once you've identified your values, write one or two sentences to explain what you mean by each word and how you live out that value in the world. It is critical to add nuance to the value and understand what it means to you, because two people may mean vastly different things when they use the same word.

Let's look at family again. One person says they value family, and they passed up their promotion because they wanted to be with their children every day. Valuing family means showing up to spend time with their children.

The next person says they also value family, and that is why they have committed their life to working long hours and making as much money as possible. Valuing family means never letting money be the reason one of their kids can't go after their dreams.

You see how it's a totally different ball game? They both value family, but the ways they bring that value into the world through action are completely different.

Complete the following prompts to help you articulate your values.

1. My value is:
2. What I mean by that is:
3. This value is reflected in my work, my friendships, and my family in these ways:
4. One story or memory of how that value was shaped is:

It can feel confusing to put your values into words, but remember, you are **not creating your values. You have them. You live them every day.** This exercise is just to help you articulate them.

Once you have your values, let's talk about who you want to reach with your story and your message.

IDENTIFYING YOUR AUDIENCE

If you knew your story could change someone's life, would you be willing to share it with them? That's the question we want you to keep coming back to over and over again. When doubt arises, just ask yourself that question. Because the truth is, your story can always change someone's life. There are enough people in need right now that one simple, inspiring story could change the way someone sees themselves.

But you wouldn't believe how many people tell us they have nothing to teach, nothing that could be really helpful to someone else. Then they start sharing. They decided to get sober when they were thirty years old; stood by the bedside of a dying family member; helped navigate the health-care system for a sick parent; live with a learning disability; have struggled with depression; started a business; have a unique parenting style; are navigating an eating disorder; grew up in an activist family; learned about loyalty through their parents' divorce; forgave someone they thought they never could; came out at thirty-five years old; came out at thirteen years old; were abused in a relationship; were an abuser in a relationship; became an expert in something totally new to them; had to learn to make peace with society's pressure to find a spouse; survived sexual violence; navigated racism. The list goes on and on.

“When I share my story it's to make a space for people to not feel alone, and in that sharing, I also don't feel alone.”

—CALEDONIA CURRY

Each of these experiences can be shared with a message attached, something important you learned on your journey. Your story and message can have a big impact.

However small or big you think your message is, you *have a message*, and there is literally someone out there whose life could change if they heard that message coming from your unique voice. Do we have to convince you more, or are you on board that you have something important to say and that there is someone out there who needs to hear it?

Here are the steps to identify your audience and articulate the message you want to share with them.

For some of you, your audience might be an individual: your kid or partner or friend. Some of you might have a very clear group you want to speak to, like a recovery community or the congregation at your mosque. Or you may feel your message needs to get out to the whole wide world.

Here is the one major pitfall people find when they start doing audience identification. They say they want to reach the *whole world*. They say, *I want to do a TED talk to get my message out there for everyone to hear*. But here's what we've discovered: **If you are talking to everyone, you are usually talking to no one.**

The more specific and clear your audience, the more universal your message. It's a paradox: When you know exactly whom you want to reach, you can reach further than that individual.

Having a single, specific person in mind helps you keep your message on track and stay true to your values.

If you're trying to convince a whole roomful of people to change the way they think, your message will be diluted. If you focus on that one imagined audience member, you will stay on message and reach the rest of the room more effectively.

Use these prompts to home in on who your ideal audience member is.

Step #1: Write down the description of one specific person who really needs to hear your story.

EXAMPLE: *A twenty-two-year-old man who is experiencing crippling depression but doesn't feel he can talk about it.*

Step #2: Write down the message you want to deliver to that person.

EXAMPLE: *Talking about what you are struggling with and getting help are the brave and the right things to do.*

Step #3: Reflect on and write down what your audience member believes about your message before hearing your story.

EXAMPLE: *He may believe that if he told people, they would judge him. He may believe that he knows how to take care of his depression, but is just not doing it.*

Step #4: How do you intend to shift his perspective after he hears your story?

EXAMPLE: *My intention is that he realizes that sharing about his depression and asking for help is the first step. And that being open and vocal about his depression will help him not feel alone in his struggles. I want him to know there is nothing to be ashamed of.*

Step #5: What parts of your story does he need to hear to trust you as a messenger on this topic? (Remember, he doesn't need to hear your whole life story, so no need to share your whole life map. Pull out one thread that demonstrates your passion on this issue.)

EXAMPLE: *In this case, asking for help is my value. The audience member needs to hear my story about what it took for me to ask for help during my lowest point in my depression. I am going to pull that thread out and paint the picture of that moment when I decided to ask for help and what resulted.*

The work of identifying your audience will help you as you start the next chapter. That's where you'll plan out what parts of your personal story you will share with your audience.

But first, let us beat you to the punch. You might be thinking: *I really don't have some big idea like that. I am not a huge leader or influencer in that way.* Let us just remind you that your unique life experience is what gives you the credibility to share this lesson learned or this big idea. And not every big idea comes from a crazy dramatic experience. A big idea about compassion or generosity can come from a quiet, introspective life. Think about all the challenges you have faced and the lessons you have learned. Those lessons are worth sharing! You have hard-won wisdom that is useful to someone—maybe your kid, maybe your peers, maybe even yourself.

It is important that you don't discredit yourself. It doesn't matter if your message doesn't feel world-changing. It might just be helpful and supportive to a handful of people. And doesn't that make it worth sharing? **Your life story has meaning.**

So, take a minute and do steps 1 through 5 to find your ideal audience member.

CRAFTING YOUR NARRATIVE

To start this chapter, let's pause for a second and review what you've already learned. In these first five chapters, you've come to recognize the inherent worth of your story as that of a human on the planet, you've explored the values you've honed throughout your life, you've articulated your message, and you've identified the audience for that message, however large or small. Great! It's time to put it all together.

The question remains, "How do I tell my story in a way that will move others to act and make real impact on the world?" This chapter provides a simple process to translate your values and stories into motivation and action for your audience (of one or one thousand) every time you share it.

Our work at the Million Person Project is centered around a specific technique called Public Narrative, which was codified by Marshall Ganz. He is a longtime organizer who started his career in the South during the civil rights movement and worked alongside Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta for many years on farmworkers' rights in California. He now teaches Organizing and Public Narrative at the Harvard Kennedy School. Marshall developed this storytelling technique to enable leaders to translate their values into action.

The Public Narrative is about sharing your personal story, illuminating values shared by your audience, and inspiring them to find the courage to choose action. In 2009, we attended a training in Washington, D.C., led by Marshall, where he taught us to use this technique to move people to action around issues like climate change, voting rights, and immigration reform. The training changed the course of our work and our lives forever.

At one point during the training with Marshall, I was called upon to help my team share a story. We were going to share one part of the Public Narrative called the “Story of Us.” The Story of Us uplifts shared experiences that help illuminate what the shared values in the community are. Marshall told us: “Your speech isn’t just about telling your story. It is about sharing your distinct story of self and then connecting with values shared by your audience. It is about creating a sense of ‘usness’ in the room.” I looked around at hundreds of young people from all backgrounds, people from the smallest West Virginia coal towns, from Native American reservations in North Dakota, from Chicago, California, and Canada. What made us a community? Along with my team, I began to craft a story of our generation. What did we know about our shared experience? What did I learn as a kid that someone in North Dakota might also have learned? Why should I see myself in them and vice versa? After a few minutes of brainstorming, I was called to share our story in front of this room of 200 young people.

I noticed my sweaty palms as I walked up. I began to tell our story. “The year I was born, the United States started celebrating Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday. We were told that he and his generation fought for equality and won. That that work was done.

“We are the generation of recycling and Earth Day. I remember when I was seven asking my parents over and over to get a ‘blue bin’ for recycling, until they got sick of hearing me and got one. We’ve been recycling ever since. We were told: ‘It’s OK. If you recycle, you’ll save the world.’ But the truth is . . . the work is not yet done!”

As I continued my story and invoked images of my ’80s and ’90s upbringing, the shouts of agreement gained momentum.

“But in reality, they were wrong. They did not tell us the whole truth! Dr. King’s work isn’t done; there is still so much to do to make this world equal. Recycling and Earth Day are not enough! Our planet needs us now.

The truth is: WE ARE THE GENERATION WHO HAS TO DO THIS WORK! We see what was done, we honor it, we've learned from it, and we are here to finish the job!!"

I finished my story and the room rose to its feet! I felt a rush of connection (as our brains and hearts synced). I was proud to feel this kinship and knew my story was effective because it was true. From that day forward, Heather and I knew there was power in story that we wanted to help people tap into. Two years, nearly to the day, after that training, we launched the Million Person Project.

Julian

Since that training we've worked with thousands of leaders all over the world to tell their personal stories and utilize Public Narrative. Public Narrative is a simple and powerful way to turn your story into an account that really inspires and moves people to action. It is organized around three parts: Story of Self, Story of Us, and Story of Now.

The Story of Self helps people understand you, your story, your values, how you came to hold them, and how those values influence your work. The Story of Us communicates shared values that make your listeners a community, an "us." The Story of Now communicates the urgent challenge you face, your sources of hope, and the choices to be made to meet that challenge.

Let's look at each section in more detail.

STORY OF SELF

The Story of Self gives you the chance to tell stories from your life that have shaped your values and called you to leadership. In the Story of Self, you will share choices you have made in your journey that inform why you care about what you care about. These are often stories of hurt and stories of hope: moments that taught you the world needs fixing and moments when you learned you could make a difference. Remember, you can draw from your life map to source stories for this. The key focus is on choice points and moments that allow you to share the origins of the

values that move you to action. When did you first care about being heard? Why do you care about learning? When did you start to feel you had to do something about it? Why did you feel you could? When did you see that?

EXAMPLE: *By the time I started high school, I had moved nine times and attended seven different schools. I rarely had the chance to participate in school activities like soccer or science club, and when I did it seemed like we would be whisked away to a new school before I could gain any real skill or enjoyment, much less make friends. So when I showed up to ninth grade, I felt entirely alone and depressed. Joining band felt like a Hail Mary attempt to make friends and to find something I excelled at. I didn't hold out much hope for success, but when I arrived on the first day and heard the tentative toots and whistles of my fellow freshmen, I figured I had at least a small shot. I picked up the clarinet assigned to me by Mr. Gill and began to learn. Day by day, class by class, I learned what it meant to be a part of a team. Truth be told I was never the most skilled, but I was dedicated to learning, dedicated to my fellow bandmates, and felt for the first time that I was a part of something meaningful, and that my contribution, however small and imperfect, was welcomed and celebrated. The first time I marched in lockstep with my fellow band members, playing our school's fight song at the homecoming game, I felt the fog of depression and isolation lift. That day I truly understood the power of music to connect, and to this day I believe it is an essential element for our school and for this community.*

The music program is about more than music to me. It's about having a space in our school where kids can discover their unique contribution to the whole, where they can experience the thrill of joining with their community to create something they could never create on their own. That is why I remain deeply committed to the arts and to this program especially.

STORY OF US

We tell stories of us all the time at family dinners, after sporting events, or at public celebrations. In all these contexts, a Story of Us is woven out of specific narrative moments from within the experience of your audience. The Story of Us is your chance to illuminate shared values with whomever you're speaking to. This is the moment to make sure everyone feels they are part of the same community or "we." Julian's story from the training experience with Marshall Ganz gives an example of a

Story of Us. By telling a story of shared experiences (blue bins, celebrating Martin Luther King Jr., etc.), he drew the listeners together as a community (us) because these experiences represented values that their generation shared.

EXAMPLE: *Many of you have stories similar to mine. For you, perhaps it was cheerleading, or soccer, or debate. At some point we've all found community through the school's many art classes and other electives, and we've learned critical lessons that serve us today. We care about this school and this community. I know that because you volunteer at games, you contribute your money and time, and you've taken time to be at this meeting today.*

STORY OF NOW

The Story of Now is where you move people to action. It begins by communicating the urgent demand for action in terms of both need and opportunity. Images of human realities speak far more loudly to this than statistics and arguments. You need to help your listeners tap into their hope, possibility, and sense of what could be, as well as what could happen if they don't act, all in human terms. This creates the context for an ask, which calls your listeners to a specific action they can perform to achieve your collective mission. It is important to remember that people don't act because of numbers and polished PowerPoint presentations; they act because you enabled them to experience, within their hearts, why that action is required of them.

EXAMPLE: *If we don't take action to save the music program, it will be shuttered by next fall. This means no band, no choir, and one fewer avenue for our children to find their voice. This means our children wouldn't get that exciting and nerve-racking opportunity to play at the sports game or in the annual parade that is so important to their self-esteem and feeling a part of the community. This choice is in our hands; we're the ones who will decide which reality our children have to live with. We'll make this decision based on our commitment to raise the \$50,000 to run this program, at least for another year. And we can do it! There are 100 of us in this room, and if each of us takes responsibility for raising \$500 we can make it work. So let me put it to you directly: Will you join me in committing to give our children another year of music in their lives? If so, stand up right now. Great. Now let's get to work!*

Can you see how this structure supports you in taking what you've learned and sharing it? Remember, you've already given thought to your audience (which will help determine your Story of Us), your call to action (Story of Now), and, of course, your personal story (Story of Self). Public Narrative can help you create your story's arc in a way that will resonate deeply with your listeners by tapping into the values you share.

Public Narrative is just one approach. The bottom line when you're crafting your narrative is to allow listeners to understand why you care, why you are there asking them to act, what values they share, and what kind of action they can join you in taking now. If you do that, you will share not only stories that people remember, but stories they will never forget.

RAISING YOUR VOICE

“There’s a sense of freedom in exposure. We’re in a time where we are being called to reveal—in the name of liberation for ourselves and others.”

—RHA GODDESS

Once you have crafted your narrative, the only thing left to do is share it. Warning: Some people sit at this step for *years*, avoiding that moment when they actually say their story out loud or click “publish” on that piece of writing.

Let’s not do that.

This is the time to reconnect to your why. You know somewhere deep inside that sharing yourself authentically—articulating who you truly are—is a pathway to deeper connection to yourself and others. You know that if you keep your story quiet, if you play small and stay safe, you won’t change the world. Generation after generation will be living in the same dysfunctional culture dominated by stories of fear and stories of separation. Your story is part of forging a new path. Your story is part of shifting the world so that courageous narratives of resilience, love, forgiveness, and transformation are the norm.

We’ve worked with thousands of people, and whether they are telling a story of extraordinary trauma and healing or a lighter love story, whether they are telling a controversial story or a story that is just going to make every audience member

smile, they all feel nervous. Speaking your truth is usually nerve-racking. Here are some steps you can take as you get ready to go public with your story.

It's important to share your story a few times with other people, before you go on stage, speak at a public meeting, or even publish an essay. You want to be prepared for how it feels. There are a lot of unknowns. Here are a few questions that might come up if you are sharing your story in writing or by speaking: What will people think of me? What if people think my story is insignificant? Or too dramatic? How will I feel after I share? And here are a few questions that come up when you are sharing by speaking specifically: What if my voice shakes or cracks during my talk? What if I cry? What if people see my hands trembling? What if I go blank and can't remember what I was going to say?

Well, you will never know what is going to happen until you try. And that's why you want to start by sharing with people you really trust.

It's OK if you cry. It's OK if you forget what you were going to say. It's OK if you have to take some deep breaths and regroup in the middle of your story. **You are building a relationship between your truth and your voice.**

We promise that you will feel really different about your story after sharing it a few times. You might have new insights. You might start to see the impact your story could have on a broader audience.

You might feel your voice strengthen and your determination to share intensify. So, before you go public, start by inviting some friends over and sharing your story. Or schedule three phone calls and share with friends one-on-one. Whatever suits you!

Once you have practiced and are ready to share with a bigger audience, here are four things that will help you *before* and four things that will help you *after* you tell your story. These are best practices based on our work with our clients. They are not practical tips for how to present yourself on stage; rather, they are tips that will help you take this important step of becoming a courageous, vulnerable, inspiring leader.

Four steps to take *before* telling your story:

Know your why. Write down exactly *why* you are sharing your story and articulate why it's meaningful to you. Write down your reason so you can consult it when you get butterflies before you share or feel shy afterward.

Here is an example from one of our clients.

RACHEL AIDAN: “I am committed to breaking the silence around childhood trauma and abuse. I am committed to being a voice that helps people understand that our trauma can be a source of transformation in our lives.”

Find a story buddy. This is the person you share your *why* with and whom you can call before and after you share. This buddy is there just to support you and listen to you. They are also there to celebrate with you once you are done. It might be awkward or seem like too much to call a friend and ask them to be this person for you, but learning to ask for help and learning to accept support is an important step toward being a leader (and a happy human).

Know your content. Many people think authenticity means sharing off the cuff. That's not the case. Sometimes authenticity takes some serious digging, and sometimes sharing truthfully requires that you practice, practice, practice. Give yourself the gift of being fully prepared and knowing your story and message inside out. It will change your life once you see the power you have when you are really prepared for something—even if you're just sharing in a small setting. It takes work and time to tell your truest story. People respect those who are prepared, and preparation also shows respect for yourself and your story.

Develop a practice for getting grounded. Sharing your story, even in writing, is usually intimidating. Getting in front of that group of people or clicking “publish” can make you anxious. Find a practice that works for you to stay grounded. Maybe it is putting both feet on the ground and taking three big breaths. Maybe it is a mantra. Maybe it is leaning up against a wall or a tree and allowing your body to be supported. Maybe it is looking at your *why* and reading it out loud. Whatever calms your nerves and keeps you grounded, do that.

Four things to do *after* you share your story:

Take care of yourself after you share. Don't go straight from sharing your story to a work meeting or a family obligation. You should take some time for yourself. Revisit your *why*, and be with yourself for a set amount of time. Go out for a coffee, take a walk, or sit quietly at your desk or on a bench in the sun. However you relax, plan to do that after you share your story.

Keep your story buddy in the loop. Make sure your story buddy knows when you are sharing and send them a text right when you are done. If you feel like talking, pick up the phone and call them. Let them celebrate you.

Be ready to receive (and know that you don't have to take it all in).

Sharing your story can stir up all kinds of emotions. Lots of people who hear your story will say things to you that you probably won't expect. We recommend that you just say: "Thank you for listening. I really appreciate you being here as I shared," instead of trying to engage with each comment. If people ask you questions you don't want to answer, just say, "I love that you want to engage more with my story, but I am feeling full because of all the sharing I just did. Let's find another time to talk." (Or if you never want to talk to them about it you can just say, "Thanks for your interest. I feel really full right now from sharing so I can't engage in more conversation about it.") It's important that you take some leadership here and know what you need and what you don't need.

Resist the urge to criticize or minimize your story. When you get a lot of compliments, it's the cultural norm to deflect and say something like, "Wow, you think? I feel like I could have done way better." Can we just *stop* doing that? We always give our clients two pieces of advice after they share. 1) When someone gives you a compliment, no matter how you feel you did, speak to what is most true: "Thank you. Sharing that was important to me. I put my best effort into it." 2) Take a twenty-four-hour break from saying anything negative or going to shoulda, woulda, coulda. Even if you tripped on stage, we don't want you to say anything negative about it for twenty-four hours. **Only positive things.** (This is not about being a Pollyanna or being inauthentic. It is balancing out the tendency to discredit yourself and focus on what you could have done better instead of celebrating what you did.)

Following these steps will support your growth into leadership. There is a narrative in our society about people being natural leaders. We don't believe that. Leaders are built. Leaders are the people who decide to take the stage. It's a lot easier for some people than for others, but not just because of people's natural abilities. It's because of who our society has favored, whose voice is easier to get into the mainstream, who is encouraged to be loud and speak up from a young age. We can change that legacy. Your voice can and will change that legacy when you decide to be the most powerful version of yourself. It's OK if you are insanely nervous or if your voice shakes. It's OK if you feel weird about your talk or wish you had done something a

little differently. You can't be perfect, and that isn't what this is about. This is about being you and articulating what is most true to you. The practices above will support you as you take those bold steps toward doing just that.

World-renowned storyteller and researcher Brené Brown coined the term *vulnerability hangover*, which so aptly describes the dreadful feeling you sometimes get the morning after sharing your story.

You wake up feeling that you have been exposed. Maybe you published your first essay or told someone your story for the first time and you think, *Shoot, did I really say all that?!*

What felt like a good idea yesterday all of a sudden feels like the worst idea you ever had, and you want to crawl into a hole.

You may wake up telling yourself one of these stories: *I overshared. That was so unprofessional. People are going to think I'm weird. It would have been better if I just stayed quiet.*

I have watched clients navigate vulnerability hangovers, even those who know about them and have taken some precautionary steps. It can be a rite of passage, and the best advice I have for any of you who experience vulnerability hangovers is to change how you view them.

Instead of playing the shoulda, woulda, coulda games and going down the *What are other people going to think?* path, stop, take a deep breath, and tenderly congratulate yourself for your courage. You didn't have to stand up and be as bold as you were. You showed up for yourself and your audience, and you didn't take the easy way out. The step you took by sharing more openly and vulnerably was literally a public service to us all. You just made more room on the planet for other people's experiences. If you need more of a humorous angle, something that works for me is telling myself, *At least I am not bored!*

As Brené puts it, “Vulnerability is our most accurate measure of courage.” And if you have decided to live this bold and courageous life, no one ever said it was going to be easy. Spending a few days of your life navigating a vulnerability hangover is a small price to pay for being a brave change maker who contributes to transforming our world. Give yourself a break, get yourself an ice cream or fries, or order takeout. Try to see your vulnerability hangover as a feather in your cap, marking one stop on the path to living a truly courageous life!

Heather

MAKING YOUR PATH

“Just the practice of telling the story in front of a group of people and seeing the opening that is created, not a closing off, not a judgment, but an opening—that’s the most transformative experience.”

—**SAMHITA MUKHOPADHYAY**

There is no right way to share a story. The right way is to share it, period! You may want to tell your story to a friend or family member. You may want to use story sharing to cultivate your relationships with your team at work. Or you may have your sights set on a much larger stage. No matter where you fall, there are places you can start sharing your story today, right now. Let’s dive into it.

PERSONAL/INTIMATE STORYTELLING

We talk a lot about speaking from big stages and refer to world-changing narratives. The truth is that cultural transformation happens at the most intimate level, too. You may be cultivating your story to share with family or friends. Perhaps you have a very specific audience of one in mind?

For personal storytelling, it’s important to think about your “container” for story sharing. What do we mean by that? Your container is defined by how you prepare yourself to share, how you prepare your audience, and how you set the stage for

sharing. Start by sharing small and with people you deeply trust. Remember, this is your story, and you get to decide how and where to tell it.

- Invite people over for coffee, tea, or a meal. Make sure you have some time for sharing and some time after to hang out and perhaps discuss what you've shared.
- Organize a walk, a hike, or a lunch with the person who will hear your story. When sharing something new, it's nice to be in nature or out in the world.
- If you want to share with someone who is geographically distant, consider a video chat as opposed to a phone call. Being able to see each other can really enrich the conversation and provide an opportunity for deeper intimacy.
- Write a letter. For sensitive stories, perhaps you don't feel like you can get the words out. Write them down and share. Ask your audience (of one or a few) to read it, and be available to engage with them after they do so.

There are many ways to share intimately. Remember to allow time to process and discuss with your people afterward.

If you're ready to share in a more public way, here are some ideas.

SHARING WITH YOUR VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

We're living in a social media world, where people are posting every day, but most are sharing a manicured story. Be different, be real, be open and honest, and change the game. We need authentic stories of inspiration front and center.

Social media provides many ways to get your story out to the world. You can write your story and share it as a post with your community at large. But remember, you have privacy settings and can determine who can and can't see your story. A really

great way to dive into publicly sharing is to use video on social media. Tell a gripping story, and see how many people you can get to watch the entire video.

Depending on the context in which you're sharing, one platform might make more sense than another. For instance, when using professional or work-related social media, you can add your personal story to your bio or write an essay that highlights your personal and emotional connection to your work. There are many platforms available, and they are ever-changing, but they can be very powerful. Ultimately, they are about social connection and strengthening our relationships to people in our community.

If you don't want to share publicly on social media, you can still share online. Even identifying ten to twenty people you want to email your story to can be powerful. You can ask for feedback or just let folks know you wanted to share.

SHARING THROUGH THE WRITTEN WORD

If you are ready to share more formally, online and offline opportunities abound! The important questions to ask yourself are why you are sharing and who you want to share with. The answers to these questions will inform where you publish your story.

Where do you read your news? Who is writing about issues you care about? Where are people discussing issues related to the themes of your story? There are hundreds of online publications, large and small, that might be interested in your story. Keep track of articles you enjoy reading. Who wrote them? Chances are you can find the writer or editor on social media, and they are most certainly interested in good content. For modern-day media, content is king, and it must be fresh every day (or several times a day). Publications are always in need of strong content. Your story might just make some editor's day much easier, but they won't know about it unless you share. Most publications have information on how to submit your story directly. Publishing online is often easier than you might think!

Good old-fashioned newspapers (online and offline) have two sections generated by community members and readers. The letter-to-the-editor section and the op-ed section might be great places for your story. Something to consider: Letters to the

editor are usually a little easier to secure than opinion pieces. They are generally letters submitted by readers of a given publication. This allows for a more personal angle, and your opinion doesn't necessarily have to reflect your professional position. If it's compelling and timely, it may be printed.

Op-eds are a great option if you have a personal connection to something that is in the news or to a specific issue related to your professional position. For example, if you have a personal story related to your work in health care, and your city or county is voting on a new health-care proposition or law, you might consider submitting an op-ed. Your personal connection and professional standing will position you well for contributing to the public dialogue.

Another popular avenue for personal narrative is memoir. It's longer form, generally a minimum of a couple hundred pages, and it allows you to explore a number of stories from your life. A memoir differs from an autobiography in that it focuses on specific anecdotes and stories, rather than detailing a chronological overview of your life. You can take the traditional route and develop a book proposal for a publisher, or you can self-publish and find your own platforms for distribution. Either way, memoir can be a great place to bring your message to the world.

STORIES FROM THE STAGE

Speaking your story can be one of the most powerful ways to share it with the world. Stages large and small are all around us, and you can find your way to them (or organize one yourself)!

You may have noticed that storytelling has become tremendously popular over the past few years. There are dozens of podcasts and shows revolving around personal story. Many groups regularly organize story-sharing competitions or open houses. Often you just throw your name in a hat for a chance to take the mic. One fun element of these events is that they are often organized around a theme. If you don't feel like your core story fits the theme, it's a great opportunity to share another story to see how that feels!

If you can't find a story stage, organize your own. Community centers, co-working facilities, colleges, schools, libraries, coffee shops, and restaurants all have space available to rent (sometimes for very cheap or free). If you don't want to rent space, host an event at your home or a friend's place. You can invite your personal friend

group and community or invite the general public. Post some fliers, create an event online for people to RSVP to, and voilà! You just created your first stage. Many community groups also welcome speakers. Check with your local Rotary Club, Kiwanis, PTA, or religious groups to see if they are interested in your topic.

When you're using storytelling and personal narrative to highlight big, bold ideas, TEDx stages are a great place to share. The potential for your story to reach millions exists when you speak on a TEDx stage, so it's worth highlighting specifically. Many people don't know that TEDx stages are hosted independently and are often fairly easy to try out for. You should look for TEDx stages based on geography and based on themes like "The Big Question" and "Truth or Dare." You will notice that the themes are loose and can be broadly interpreted. Like writers and editors, TEDx organizers are looking for great content and speakers. Reach out to determine how you can try out or submit your speech. You might have just the story they are looking for!

CREATIVE STORYTELLING

Story isn't just shared through speaking and writing. Some of the most compelling and successful plays, movies, and TV shows are based on real people sharing their real stories. You may want to turn a story into a one-woman show, or craft a fictionalized account to share as a short story, or write a screenplay! Check out your local community college for classes on all three of those options and more. There are people who want to help you get your story and vision into the world. Knowing you want to share is the first step. Start sharing that vision with others, and you will get the help you need to move forward. Take one second and look up. See the sky? That's your limit!

STORYTELLING FOR THE OFFICE

Story can supercharge your work world, too. How might you integrate your story into your professional life?

If you have the opportunity to attend conferences, you may present on your work as part of a panel or as a singular keynote speaker. The standard for presentation is often pretty dry, based solely on data or consisting only of a review of work. Switch it up and bring your story into the equation. Even three minutes of your story can give context for your work and transform the feeling in the room. If you share a story and connect vulnerably with your audience, they will remember you and your work! Retreats, larger meetings, and company publications can all be places to share your story. Personal narrative opens people's eyes, grabs their attention, and cultivates connection and shared context!

If you are a manager or supervisor, bringing on new staff presents a great opportunity. You can set a powerful context for what is important to you about your place of business and enroll them in your vision for what you can create together. Allowing new staff to know your motivations and values can immediately make them feel more confident in their role and more willing to share their motivations and excitement. Lead the way and deepen the connection!

When working to create change in your community or company, storytelling is your best friend. Whether it is for a public testimony on an issue, recruiting volunteers for a campaign, or speaking out about different community concerns, bringing in the personal and using the Public Narrative can add fire to your cause.

This book is short and sweet, so we can't get into all the ways you can share, but there are many opportunities in different formats, for groups large and small, and in our personal and professional lives. What's important is that you commit to joining the conversation and getting your voice out in the world.

STORY-SHARING RULES TO LIVE BY

If you only remember one thing: Be yourself and trust that you are the right person to deliver your message.

How you begin your talk is so important. You must know how you're going to take off. Knowing how you will start allows you to be relaxed and engaged with your audience.

How you close is even *more* important. When you stand up, you *must* know the last thing you're going to say. If you are struggling through the content but say something meaningful at the end, you will be OK.

PREPARATION AND DELIVERY

Know your stuff and trust yourself: Speak about what you know. Build your talk around your vision and purpose. Trust that you are the person to tell this story.

Practice, and practice again: It works! Don't wing it. The more you practice, the more natural and creative you can be in the moment. Practice allows you to check your "ums" and "likes" and determine points of emphasis, general flow, and tone. Pay special attention to the moments of transition in your speech.

You've got time: You know the general length of your presentation. You've got time. Speaking fast is the most common way nerves show up in public speaking. Don't rush, go slow and steady. Pauses feel longer for you than they do for your audience. Don't be afraid of pauses; they are a great

way to emphasize important points (and give you a minute to gather your thoughts!). Don't be afraid to repeat yourself strategically, to land strong points.

Stage presence: Stand up straight, and pay attention to posture. Use the stage dynamically if possible and if it feels right. Move around, but make sure to find moments of stillness as well. Eye contact is important, but don't linger too long on any one person.

It's not nerves; it's normal: Sweaty palms, butterflies in the belly, dry mouth: these are not signs of a problem. These are the signs of a body getting ready to deliver a speech.

It happens to all of us and it's a normal part of the process. Take the power away from "nerves." It's just your body preparing to do something important.

"Storytelling offers us the gift of being seen."

—FENTON LUTUNATABUA

YOU'RE UP!

It's time to step out, step up, and share. With one person or ten or 1,000. The time is now. You may be thinking that you need more time to explore your story. You may be thinking you need to write it out to perfection. You may still be wrestling with truly believing your story is worth sharing. Here is the thing: The act of actually sharing your story, even with just one person, will reveal more to you about your story and its potential to transform you and those around you than any amount of "thinking" about it will. So this chapter is your pep talk. **You are ready!**

Committing to be the truest version of yourself takes courage. Your heart will probably beat faster than you want, and you might need a few extra ice cream cones in the process. But it's worth it because **you have one chance on this planet as you**, so you might as well be the most you can be in this lifetime. Honestly, life is not all that long. If you spend five years procrastinating on something, five years meaning to get back to writing, five years deliberating over whether to share your story, that's a significant percentage of your life. On average, that's 6 percent of your existence as a human being. And you wouldn't believe how many people show up on the Million Person Project's doorstep with a world-changing narrative all balled up inside, having held it in for decades.

It's time for you to unravel your story and get to sharing it. It's time to stop letting our world be defined by narratives that don't truly represent us. Our world needs *you*. The stage is yours. Get up there and let yourself shine.

Walking the personal storytelling path won't always be easy. You will have to navigate people's reactions and your own vulnerability, not to mention self-doubt and that inner voice that tells you to keep it to yourself. Remember, your story has the power

to inspire thousands or even millions of people around the world, but you have to take that critical first step and share it.

Your story isn't about what happened to you or what you've done. It's about who you've chosen to be, given that. And who you've chosen to be is honest, courageous, and ready to change the world.

You have an opportunity right now that no one else on the planet has, and that is to share your unique story. What a gift. It's your time. It's your turn. It's your story and your truth. You can't know entirely the effect your story will have, and there may be points in your journey where you try to convince yourself that it's not worth it. This book is here to serve as your pep talk and as a loving reminder that, with courage and willingness, your story will set us all free. You're up!

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